DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 207 PS 010 993

AUTHOR Troll, Lillian E.
TITLE Grandparenting.
PUB DATE Sep 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (87th, New York, NY, September 1-5, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Family (Sociological Unit); Family Influence; Family Relationship; Generation Gap; *Grandchildren; *Grandparents; Group Norms; *Individual Differences; *Interaction; Literature Reviews; Research Needs; *Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

To date, fewer than a dozen studies of grandparenting have been reported. While a serious reading of the available data is premature, several lines of inquiry and issues can be identified and discussed. This presentation explores six general topics: (1) age and cohort differences, (2) sex differences, (3) social group differences, (4) individual variations in style, (5) relation to the family as a system, and (6) reciprocal influence of grandparents and grandchildren. Self reports indicate age differences in feelings of closeness between grandchildren and grandparents. Male grandparents may attempt to influence their grandchildren more than do grandmothers, but grandmothers are more likely to have warm relationships with their grandchildren than are grandfathers. Relations with grandchildren appear to be more alike than different across ethnic and class groups. Different styles of grandparenting have been found to be characteristic of particular cultures, life stages, and personalities. Additional family studies which view the family as a system extending over several generations and focus on intra-family structures and functions are recommended. Research indicates that grandparents and adult grandchildren acknowledge reciprocal attempts to influence each other -- on certain topics. (Author/RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED178207

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lillian E. Troll
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

GRANDPARENTING[a]

Lillian E. Troll
Rutgers University

There are less than a dozen studies on grandparenting at the present time; this does not count speculative articles or conclusions derived from clinical practice. What is more, few consistent findings emerge from these studies. Writing this paper has thus been difficult, suggesting that it is premature and presumptious to attempt any serious reading of the data. Instead, I will try to summarize the several lines of inquiry and issues generated. There are six general topics:

1) age and cohort differences
2) sex differences
3) social group differences
4) individual variations in style
5) relation to the family as a system
6) reciprocal influence of grandparents and grandchildren

Age and Cohort Differences

As we all have heard by now, demographic shifts during the past century increased the proportion of older people, made grandparenting a middle-aged rather than an old-aged phenomenon, and increased the number of four and five-generation families. More people are living out their full life span; there was a trend in the second quarter of this century for couples to marry earlier, to have their first child sooner, to have fewer children altogether, and those closely spaced. Present-day grandparents are thus more

PS010993

[a]Presented at APA, New York City, 1979.

likely to have become grandparents when they were in their forties and, since they finished their parenting in their mid-twenties, to be identifiable as grandparents instead of also as parents of young children. These young grandparents are, however, likely to have living parents and sometimes even grandparents to divide their attention. Finally, most grandmothers as well as grandfathers are likely to be employed outside the home and thus not only do not fit a rocking-chair image but are not available as child-care aides to their children.

These new conditions are reflected in much of the literature on garndparenting, which treats grandparents either categorically as old people who have lost their traditional power in society--presumably as a result of greater supply than demand--or as unexpectedly intrusive and disruptive elements in family interactions.

As a final demographic note, consider that about three-fourths of people over 65 in the United States have living grandchildren and three-fourths of these see their grandchildren at least every week or two (Harris and Associates, 1975), nearly half every day or so--although only about five percent of households headed by older people contain grandchildren (Atchley, 1977).

When we consider that grandparents can be anywhere between 40 and 120 years old, and grandchildren anywhere between 1 day and 100 years old, we have to wonder about the effect of age on grandparent-grandchild relations. I do not have to remind you that chronological age is a treachorous index, particularly in later life and that for many behaviors family position is much more useful for predictions. Nonetheless, ignoring age altogether is making an opposite kind of error.

When Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) examined variations in styles of grandparenting, they found age differences. Some younger grandparents were fun seekers and some distant figures; older grandparents were more formal and distant. Kahana and Kahana (1970) and Clark (1969) report that younger grandchildren are more appealing to older grandparents. But that seems to be all we know so far as grandparents' age is concerned. The effect of grandparents' life conditions in general on their relations with their grandchildren is what we want more information about. Do more feeble grandparents like older grandchildren, for example, or relatively immobile infants? Do more idea-oriented grandparents like older, presumably more idea-capable grandchildren? Does retirement have an effect? Does lineage position --being first or second or third surviving generation? We can generate dozens of questions in this area alone.

So far as age of grandchildren, almost all studies have focused upon the years of childhood and adolescence. When adult grandchildren have been studied, age-related dimensions are almost always ignored. Kahana and Kahana (1970) report that up to about the age of 10, children are closer to their grandparents than later, that this feeling is reciprocal. Further, four and five-year olds value indulgence in grandparents and eight and nine-year olds want them to share their fun, but eleven and twelve-year olds remove themselves altogether. These preliminary data, based on a small sample, certainly need replicating before we can draw any conclusions. There seem to be two opposing conclusions for adolescents, either that they are permanently alienated from grandparents or that they turn to grandparents as important family resources when in conflict with their parents. So far,

more of the data come out on the side of the importance of grandparents (Robertson, 1977; Hagestad, 1979; Gilford and Black, 1972) to young adults, so if there is alienation during adolescence, it must be only temporary or limited. A further note of caution, related to the preponderance of self-report data in this area, is what Bengtson and Kuypers (1971) have so aptly called the "generational stake." Youth, in the process of distinguishing their own unique identity, tend to underestimate the importance of parents and family in their lives, while older generations, in the process of recognizing the finiteness of their direct influence upon society, will over-estimate their contribution to and identity with their children and grandchildren, and thus their indirect influence upon the future.

And a final note of caution to conclude the dicussion of age and population structure is the possible uniqueness of the cohort upon which these data are based. Just as this cohort of grandparents differs from past cohorts with respect to numbers of older people and numbers of family generations, so may it differ from future cohorts in the same ways. To cite only one relevant predictor: age of marriage and birth of first child has recently been shifting upward again. The new generation of babies born to mothers in their thirties will again have older grandparents. There may also be fewer grandchildren than grandparents as well as more step-grandparents and step-grandchildren to change the picture.

Sex Differences

Throughout the family literature, sex of parent and sex of child create important differences in interaction. Families tend to be female-linked, for example. Hagestad (1979) recently found that

grandmothers are more likely to have warm relationships with their grandchildren than are grandfathers, and most of these warm relationships are along the maternal line. This salience of maternal grandmothers, however, is not true for intergenerational influence, alghough grandfathers do tend to under-report their attempts to influence their grandchildren. Grandmothers also seem to differentiate more between grandsons and grandaughters, and to concentrate on a smaller number of topics for influencing. Sex differences in the grandchildren do not affect their perceptions of their grandparents' influence. How much changing sex-roles affect such findings we cannot say. Explanations for female family linkage are altogether absent.

Social Group Differences

One cross-cultrual study (Apple, 1956) found that grandparents in societies where the old have diminished power tend to have more equalitarian and indulgent, warm relationships with their grandchildren than do grandparents in those societies where the old have economic power and prestige. Extrapolating from several studies of older black, white and Hispanic people (e.g. Cantor, 1977) in our own country, we might conclude that aside from younger ages for becoming grandparents in black and Hispanic groups, relations with grandchildren are more alike across groups than they are different. We are assuming that such comparisons would control for social class which, unfortunately, they rarely do. In general, middle class grandparents, who would have more status and power than lower-class grandparents, could also have more influence on their grandchildren. This conclusion might easily be challanged, however, because the data still show remarkably little

within family alienation in any social group. Clearly, a host of studies are needed here.

Styles of Grandparents

Neugarten and Weinstein's (1964) classic study described five different styles: formal, fun-seeker, surrogate parent, reservoir of family wisdom, and distant figure. They found that different styles were more characteristic of particular cultures, life stages, or personalities. Robertson (1977) and Gilford and Black (1972) both stress the individualized nature of being a grandparent. Whether or not this indicates that grandparenting is a peripheral role, it does show that people seem freer to adopt more variable modes of relating to grandchildren than they did to fulfilling their roles as parents. To use Robertson's term, there is a person dimension as well as a function dimension in grandparenting.

Family as a System

Viewing the family as a system has been suggested by a few theorists over the years, notably Hess and Handel (1959). This has mostly focused upon childrearing units. Yet the examination of common family themes and strength of family boundaries becomes much more interesting when expanded over several generations. Commonality of values among members of three-generation lineages is consistent with frequency of interactions and perception of influence (Hill et al, 1970; Troll and Bengtson, 1979). What has not been done is to examine the effect of differences among family systems in shared family themes and strength of family boundaries upon differences in other aspects of grandparent-grandchild relationships. Gilford and Black

(1972) as well as Robertson (1977) conclude that there are both family systemic and personal components to the grandparent-grandchild relationship. These are significant studies that cry for more.

Reciprocal Influencing

It seems clear from Hagestad's (1979) findings that both grandparents and grandchildren who are adults acknowledge reciprocal attempts to influence each other. They not only acknowledge them, they respect them and are influenced. One of the most interesting aspects of these interchanges is the distinction made--covertly--between the kind of topics that can be handled in this way and the kind that should be avoided for the purpose of maintaining family ties. Hagestad's term of demilitarized zones applies to what I and Bengston (Troll and Bengston, 1979) have called generational themes. Against a backdrop of shared values and personality traits are the new and identity-providing themes of each new generation as it comes of age.

In conclusion, I repeat what I said in the beginning of this paper. The study of grandparenting is important. We have barely scratched the surface, however, and have to guess more than deduce.

References

1. Apple, Dorian. The social structure of grandparenthood. American Anthropologist, 1956, 58, 656-663.

2. Atchley, Robert. Social forces of later life, second edition. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1977.

3. Bengston, Vern and Kuypers, Joseph. Generational difference and the generational stake. Aging and Human Development, 1971, 2, 249-260.

4. Cantor, Marjorie. The extent and intensity of the informal support system among New York's inner-city elderly--is ethnicity a factor? Presented at Hunter College School of Social Work, 1977.

5. Clark, Margaret. Cultural values and dependency in later life. In Kalish, Richard (Ed.) The dependencies of old people. Ann Arbor, Mich. University of Michigan Institute of Gerontology, 1969.

6. Gilford, Rosalie and Black, Dean. The grandchild-grandparent dyad: Ritual or relationship. Presented at Gerontological Society, 1972.

7. Hagestad, Gunhild. Patterns of communication and influence between grandparents and g andchildren in a changing society. Presented at World Congress of Sociology, Sweden, 1978.

8. Harris, Louis and associates. The myth and reality of aging in America. New York: National Council on Aging, 1975.

9. Hess, Robert and Handel, Gerald. Family worlds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

10. Hill, Reuben; Foote, Nelson; Aldous, Joan; Carlson, Robert; and MacDonald, Robert. Family development in three generations. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1970.

11. Kahana, Boaz and Kahana, Eva. Grandparenthood from the perspective of the developing grandchild. Developmental Psychology, 1970, 3 (1), 98-105.

12. Neugarten, Bernice and Weinstein, Karol. The changing American grandparent. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1964, 26, 199-204.

13. Robertson, Joan F. Grandmotherhood: a study of role conceptions. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1977, 39 (1), 165-174.

14. Troll, Lillian and Bengtson, Vern. Generations in the family. In Burr, Wesley; Hill, Reuben; Nye, Ivan; and Reiss, Ira (Eds.) Contemporary theories about the family. New York: Free Press, 1979, 127-161.